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An Affair of the Mind

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An Affair of the Mind

—Ron Prabl
English, Grad.

THE DOCTOR removed his horn-rimmed glasses and looked at his patient. Mervyn Ash sat huddled on one side of the chair, his eyes darting nervously about the room. The doctor spoke again.

"No, nothing you say will leave this office. Everything will be kept in the strictest confidence, of *course*. Now then. Do you want to start at the beginning, Mr. Ash?"

"Yes sir. The beginning. Yes, well, it must've been a couple months ago I guess. Uh, I was sitting there at my desk—I'm a bookkeeper at Emerson's you know—anyway, I was sitting there, and pretty soon, for some reason, I turned around and saw the new girl. She was looking right at me. And then at lunch that day she pretended to drop something so that she could sneak a look in my direction. She saw that I was watching her, though, so she real quick looked over my head and smiled and waved like it was really someone else she'd been looking at. I looked around and saw this character in front of my desk, waving and kind of smiling. He looked down at me and winked. He sure must've thought she was crazy or something."

"Crazy, Mr. Ash?" interrupted the psychiatrist.

"Well, it was pretty obvious that she was making a fool of herself." Mervyn smiled sheepishly. "*I* thought it was funny. It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud. I mean *really*, if those two knew each other, I'll eat my hat. It must have been embarrassing for her, though, so I really shouldn't make fun. You understand."

"Go on." The psychiatrist slid his glasses back into place.

"Well, the way I saw it, she wanted to meet me. I thought it was plain enough. I hadn't really reacted to her obvious advances, though, so it's possible she thought I didn't like her. Actually, this very thing happens all the time. A man can lose interest mighty fast if a woman goes overboard, if you follow my meaning.

"Anyway, a day or two later she didn't come to work. It was a miserable day. I'll never forget it. I sat there wondering if she had overslept or had had car trouble—even an accident! Then it dawned on me that she might just be playing hard to get. That's one of their favorite tricks, doctor. Playing hard to get." Mervyn shook his head and smiled like a man who suddenly understands that the difficulty of his problem lies in its very simplicity. Dr. Barrington shook his head too, slowly and thoughtfully, unseen by the patient. Mervyn continued.

"She didn't come back for a few days. I kept busy at home, cleaning house and cutting out new pictures. Whenever I've got something serious on my mind, I just work it off. Good for the soul. Incidentally, I've got over a hundred pictures now. One hundred and eight to be exact. I counted them all after the new ones were pasted up on the special south wall. It won't be long until that wall's completely covered. Usually I wait for the Sunday paper—there are always more then—but, as it turned out, I got five real beauties."

"You cut pictures from the newspaper?" The doctor braced his elbows on the desk and leaned forward, frowning slightly. "Pictures of girls?"

Mervyn jerked suddenly as if awakening from a cat nap. He looked deeply into Dr. Barrington's eyes but did not answer. After a long pause, the doctor spoke again.

"How about friends, Mr. Ash? You've never once mentioned friends, and. . . ."

"Friends!?" snapped Mervyn. "I have *plenty* of friends. Just because I haven't bragged about being popular doesn't mean I don't have any friends!"

"I didn't mean to imply" the psychiatrist began but was cut off.

"One of my best friends works right there at Emerson's. Stan. In fact I was just about to bring him in. He sits a few desks in front of me. We sometimes have coffee break together. He's really funny. He's always laughing. He calls me 'Sport.'"

"Well, anyway, I opened the conversation one morning in the usual way: 'How's everything going?' etc., etc., etc. Finally I managed to throw in a comment like 'By the way, I see the new girl hasn't been in for the last few days.' Something like that. I made it sound like any other small talk. 'Anything the matter? Or maybe she just decided to leave the crummy place—not that I blame her.' I said it just about that way."

"Well, to make a long story short, he told me that the girl—Virginia!—had taken a week's vacation to visit her folks or something. I didn't let on how relieved I was! He's sure to have thought nothing of it. I *do* have a knack for finding out things when I want to." Mervyn stopped to light a cigarette. He took a few short puffs and then crushed it out.

"I asked Stan over a couple days later. We had a few beers and talked about work. I didn't even *mention* Virginia—I'm not a person to rush things. Heaven knows I'm patient. Oh yes, I was careful to pull the curtain over my pictures—not that I'm ashamed of them or anything like that, you understand. It's just that I'd rather not have people looking at them.

"My insect collection caught his eye right off. I always kept it out where people could see it. The Orthoptera collection is my favorite—everybody who's seen it tells me that it's very nice. Of course, they don't know insects like I do, but I still appreciate the thoughtful comments."

Dr. Barrington shifted in his swivel seat. "I *wonder* about Stan, Mr. Ash. But, go on; what happened to the girl?"

"I sent her a sweater for Christmas. Anonymously of course. I wasn't ready to go rushing into something. I knew it might frighten her. Heaven knows there are enough Neanderthals around. I sent her a pretty pale yellow cardigan—I'd noticed her fondness for cardigans. It had some

white frilly stuff on it that girls like.

"Well, I waited and waited, but she never wore that sweater. She *did* look at me once in a while, which was encouraging, but she didn't smile anymore.

"Around the first of February, she quit. I was really crushed. I talked to Stan, and he said that she'd run off and got married. Funny, I never noticed her ring."

"I didn't go to work then for a few days. In fact, I thought about quitting. I was really depressed. Her picture was in the paper, and I cut it out; but I may just throw it away. Serve it right. Women are so fickle. Why did she do that to me? She could have at least worn the sweater. Is that asking too much? Just once?"

Dr. Barrington tapped his pipe on the edge of his large glass ash tray. "Perhaps she was engaged *before* she started work without your knowing about it. And it's quite possible that your gift—the sweater—touched her very deeply. You really must be careful not to condemn her action too severely."

Mervyn nodded, looking at his shoes. "Yes sir. I guess."

"Well," the doctor said, looking at his watch. "I'll see you tomorrow after work. I think we should definitely talk some more about Stan. In the meantime, keep your chin up. These things have a way of working themselves out."

The space of a day passed quickly, and Dr. Barrington greeted a sprightly Mr. Mervyn Ash. "Evidently," he mused, "these sessions have done some good."

"Doctor," Mervyn started, disregarding the usual formalities. "Everything is really looking up. Listen! The new girl—Virginia's replacement—started today. I could tell right off that she liked me. First of all, a bunch of the office guys kept swarming around and talking to her. They're too forward. They could learn something from me. Anyway, they kept it up for a while, talking and keeping her attention—probably trying to get the jump on *me*! I'm sure of this because every now and then one would look back at me. Stan was joking with them too. Later, I'll find out from him what the situation is.

“When they finally left her alone for a few minutes, what do you suppose happened?”

“She looked at you,” came the doctor’s strained reply.

“Exactly!! She turned and looked at me. I was looking right at her—that really gets them. She smiled. I didn’t exactly smile back, though—you know, it’s best not to let them think you’re interested. Not at first, anyway.”

I Was Wrong

—*Alan L. Andersen*
English, Sr.

Whenever I used to think about dying
I always figured, you know, that when I died
I would stop . . . being . . .
Or else I would go to the Heaven
That Father Osdecker had always told me about.

But when I died, they put me in this box—
And I’ve been here ever since.
I’d always thought that the Spirit would be free to leave.

The Funeral was nice—
The priest said a lot of good things about me,
And everybody cried.

It wasn’t even so bad when they put me in this hole
And covered me up.
But it’s this decomposition that gets to me.
You know, the flesh falling off my hands and stomach . . .
And those little things crawling around inside my eyeballs
bug me.